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Der Präsident des Europäischen Patentamts;
Im Auftrag

For the President of the European Patent Office

Le Président de l'Office européen des brevets
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Information processing system.

The invention relates to an information processing system comprising:

- a display,
- processing means, arranged for displaying in a first field on the display a first sequence of first icons in a timed loop and repeatedly making the currently displayed
- 5 first icon selectable, and
- selecting means, arranged for selecting the selectable first icon.

The invention further relates to a method for enabling a user to select an icon from a set of icons, the set comprising a plurality of first icons, comprising the steps of:

- 10 - displaying the first icons in a timed loop in a first field on a display and repeatedly making the currently displayed first icon selectable, and
- detecting a selection of the selectable first icon.

Such an information processing system and method are known from the article "Dynamic icon presentation", IBM Technical Disclosure Bulletin, Vol. 35, No. 15 4B, September 1992, pages 227-232. In the known system, an icon represents a certain task or application program, e.g. a mail program, and selection of that icon results in the execution of that program. A number of icons are grouped together into a set and each icon of the set is presented in a timed sequence. The icons are shown one after the other in a single field on the display. The icon which is displayed at a certain moment 20 can be selected and its selection causes the associated program to be executed. The known system allows a user to select an icon from among one series of icons using one field on the display.

It is an object of the invention to provide an information processing system of the kind set forth with an improved organisation of icons. This object is 25 achieved according to the invention in an information processing system that is characterised in

- that the processing means are arranged for, upon detection of selection of the

selectable first icon, displaying in a second field on the display a second sequence of second icons in a timed loop and repeatedly making the currently displayed second icon selectable, and

- that the selecting means are arranged for selecting the selectable second icon.

- 5 By displaying a particular second sequence of icons in the second field when a particular one of the icons of the first sequence has been selected, the system according to the invention allows for a hierarchical menu structure with icons, using only two fields on the display. A hierarchical menu is an efficient and effective mechanism for supporting the user in selecting an icon from a relatively large number of icons. The
- 10 icons are organised into a number of groups according to some criterion and the user first selects a group rather than directly selecting the icon from the large number of icons. The invention realises these advantages of a hierarchical menu with a limited number of fields. This leaves the rest of the space of the display available to present information or to allow for other fields with selectable icons. The menu structure with
- 15 fewer selectable fields is easier to use since it is less confusing and reduces the risk of errors. Furthermore, since the number of selectable fields on the display is low, the fields may be designed to be larger, thereby allowing larger icons. A larger icon may result in a better, higher quality image of the icon, which improves the identification of the icon. Furthermore, such larger icons may be used to present through the images,
- 20 information to the user.

An embodiment of the information processing system according to the invention is defined in Claim 2. Since the information item is displayed in the output field on the display, while the first field with the selected icon is still visible by the user, the relation between the outputted information item and the selected first icon is

25 directly clear to the user. This directness reassures the user that the information item is displayed in response to the selected first icon. This is advantageous over a system where an icon is selected in one screen on the display and, in response to that, a completely new screen on the display is shown with the desired information item. In the information processing system according to the invention, the information item is

30 displayed in addition to displaying the second sequence of second icons and may therefore be used to provide information about the selected first icon and/or further explaining the second sequence of second items.

An embodiment of the information processing system according to the invention is defined in Claim 3. For the same reasons as for the selected first icon, the simultaneous display of the selected second icon and the outputted information item directly demonstrates the relation between those two. The information item displayed in response to a selection of a second icon may constitute some piece of information desired by the user.

It is a further object of the invention to provide a method of the kind set forth with an improved organisation of icons. This object is achieved according to the invention in a method that is characterised in that the set of icons comprises a plurality of second icons and that the method further comprises the steps of:

- upon detection of the selection of the selectable first icon, displaying the second icons in a timed loop in a second field on the display and repeatedly making the currently displayed second icon selectable, and
- detecting a selection of the selectable second icon.

The method according to the invention allows selection of an icon from a hierarchy of icons, using only two fields on the display. Selecting an icon from the sequence of icons displayed in the first field corresponds to choosing an icon from the first level of the hierarchy. Subsequently selecting a second icon from the sequence displayed in the second field corresponds to choosing an icon from the particular second level of the hierarchy depending on the chosen icon on the first level. The method according to the invention is advantageous with respect to the known method where an icon would be selected through a single selection from a large unstructured set of icons. It would require a long period of time before all of the icons are presented and it would be difficult to maintain an overview of the available icons. The method according to the invention is also advantageous with respect to a method that would simultaneously display all available icons in respective fields on the display. This would require a large number of fields on the display, cluttering the screen on the display and leaving only limited space for other input or output of other information.

The method according to the invention can be exploited in a database management system used as an information retrieval system. Numerous applications are possible for such a system: retrieval of documents from a document management system, retrieval of travel information based on subsequent specification of a

destination, retrieval of departure and arrival times of trains, and many other systems.

Further advantageous embodiments of the invention are recited in the dependent claims.

The invention and its attendant advantages will be further elucidated with
5 the aid of exemplary embodiments and the accompanying schematic drawings, whereby:

Figure 1 schematically shows the principle of displaying a sequence of icons in a field on the display,

Figure 2 shows the principle of displaying two sequences of icons in respective fields on the display according to the invention,

10 Figure 3 schematically shows the most important components of the information processing system according to the invention, and

Figure 4 shows a further example of the display according to the invention.

Corresponding features in the various Figures are denoted by the same
15 reference symbols.

Figure 1 schematically shows the principle of displaying a sequence of icons in a field on the display. A sequence 102 comprises 4 icons, I1, I2, I3 and I4, which are displayed one after the other. An icon remains visible in field 104 on the display for a certain period of time, after which it is replaced by its successor in the
20 sequence. During the period that the icon is visible, the icon is made selectable, i.e. during that period the icon may be selected by a user. The selection process can for instance be implemented by the known point and click mechanism for selecting an icon. In this mechanism, the user moves a cursor on the screen on the display to the desired position with the icon by means of an input device, like a mouse or track ball or other
25 pointing device. When the cursor is at the desired position, the user makes the selection by clicking, or in some applications double clicking, a button of the input device. Selection of the visible icon results in the execution of the task corresponding to that icon. The sequence of icons is preferably implemented as a loop, so that after displaying icon I4, icon I1 is again displayed and made selectable. In this way, the
30 system keeps displaying icons from sequence 102 until the user selects an icon.

Figure 2 shows the principle of displaying two sequences of icons in respective fields on the display according to the invention. A sequence 202 comprises 4

icons, which are displayed one after the other in a first field 204 on the display. As described above, the icon which becomes visible in the field 204 is made selectable for the user. An icon of sequence 202 has an associated second sequence of second icons. In the figure, icon I11 has an associated second sequence 206, icon I12 has second
5 sequence 208, I13 has second sequence 210 and I14 has second sequence 212. A second sequence comprises a number of icons, which is not necessarily the same as the number of icons in sequence 202. The icons of the second sequence are displayed one after the other in a second field 214 on the display. When an icon of the second sequence is visible, it can be selected by the user. Selection of this icon results in the execution of
10 the task which is represented by it. This may be the execution of a program, the retrieval of an information item, or some other kind of task available in the information processing system.

Using the sequences shown in Figure 2, the following example further explains the operation of the invention. In field 204, the icons of sequence 202 are
15 displayed one after the other. At a certain moment, icon I12 is displayed and selected by the user. Then, as a consequence of that selection, the icons of sequence 208 are displayed one after the other in field 214 on the display. Subsequently the user chooses the desired icon from sequence 208 by selecting it when it has become visible in display field 214. In the example shown, the user can select icon I123 since that icon is
20 currently visible and selectable.

When no selection of an icon from sequence 202 has taken place yet, there is no specific sequence that is to be displayed in field 214. In this case, a default sequence may be displayed in that field. Alternatively no sequence at all may be displayed in field 214. When selection of an icon from sequence 202 has taken place,
25 the associated sequence of icons is displayed in field 214. The example of Figure 2 shows a hierarchical menu structure of two levels. The first level is formed by sequence 202 and the second level is formed by the sequences 206 - 208. The invention realises the hierarchical menu structure with only two fields on the display. It will be clear that the two levels and two fields are by way of example only and that further levels may be
30 included according to the principle of the invention. In such a case, a second icon of a second sequence has in its turn an associated sequence of icons which is upon selection displayed in a third field on the display.

In a preferred embodiment, selection of an icon from the lowest level, in Figure 2 an icon from one of the sequences 206 - 212, results in the display of an information item in a dedicated output field on the display. Such an information item may be a single item, like a textual message or a photographic image, or it may be a sequence of items displayed one after the other, like a number of messages, a number of still images or even a video. In this embodiment, the field 214, comprising the selected icon, and the dedicated output field, comprising the result of the selection, are shown simultaneously in the same screen on the display. This gives the user a feeling of directness since the selected icon and its result are shown in a single screen on the display without swapping between screens. This directness reassures the user that the presented information item is indeed the consequence of selection of the icon. This preferred embodiment may advantageously be used as an information retrieval system with a database with a number of information items, in which the information items are selected through the selection of icons in subsequent sequences. Then the number of levels will normally be larger than two. The selection of an icon in the first sequence makes a rough selection among the information items and subsequent selections of icons make the selection finer and finer until the desired information item has been selected.

In addition to displaying an information item in response to selecting an icon at the lowest level, also the selection of an icon at a higher level may result in displaying an information item in the output field. Then the selection of such higher level icon has two results: the associated sequence of icons is displayed in the appropriate field on the display and an associated information item is displayed in the output field on the display. In such a case, the information item may introduce or explain the associated sequence, supporting the user in the selection process.

Figure 3 schematically shows the most important components of the information processing system according to the invention. The information processing system 300 is implemented according to a known architecture and can be realised on a general purpose computer. The information processing system has a processor 302 for carrying out instructions of an application program loaded into working memory 304. The information processing system further has an interface 306 for communication with peripheral devices. There is a bus 308 for exchange of commands and data between the various components of the system. The peripherals of the information processing system

include a storage medium 310 containing the executable programs, the sequences of icons, the set of information items, and various other data. The storage medium 310 can be realised as various separate devices, potentially of different kind of storage device. Application of the invention is not restricted by the type of device and storage devices which can be used include optical disc, magnetic disc, tape, chip card, solid state or some combination of these devices. Furthermore, some of the data may be at a remote location and the information processing system may be connected to such a location by a network via connection 311. The peripherals of the information processing system further include a display 312 on which the system displays, amongst others, fields 204 and 214 and output field 313. Furthermore the peripherals include a selection device 314 and a pointing device 316 with which the user can move a cursor on the display. Devices 314 and 316 can be integrated into one selecting means 318 like a computer mouse with one or more selection buttons. However, other devices like a track ball, graphic tablet, joystick, or touch sensitive display are also possible. In order to carry out the various tasks, a number of software modules are loaded into the working memory 304, among which is the module constituting processing means 320 for controlling the display and selection of the sequences in the fields on the display.

Figure 4 shows a further example of the display according to the invention. The display 400 comprises a number of fields, 402 - 408, in which sequences of icons may be displayed and where icons may be selected as described above. The fields are relatively large and may serve, in addition to allowing the user to make a selection, a further purpose by presenting information to the user. The icons may be designed in such a way that they contain information to the user. This may be in the form of images or in the form of textual messages, conveying information for the user. The display further comprises an output field 410 for displaying an information item after a selection of an icon has been made. However, in the absence of a selection also an information item may be displayed as some default item. The information item may be related to a sequence of icons displayed in one of the fields 402 - 408. The information item may be a single item or may comprise a sequence of sub-items, like the images in a slide show or the pages in a document.

An information processing system for presenting information to a user may be designed between two extremes. On the one hand, the system may be of a

'broadcast' type, in which the information is presented to the user in a sequential way without interruption and without any user interaction. This is for example course material presented via a VCR (video cassette recorder); once the tape has been started to play back, the information is presented without interruption and without giving the user adequate control over the presented material. In this type of system, the system is in control and the user plays a passive role. On the other hand, the system may be organised as an encyclopaedia. The user must fully specify the information item he desires and the system retrieves and presents this information item. The user must specify the next desired information item and the system then retrieves and presents this next information item. In this approach, the user is in control and has to play a very active role.

Now, the information processing system according to the invention allows for a system that may function in either of the two ways, depending on the instantaneous user. The system may present through the display of sequences in a number of respective fields and through the output field a continuous stream of information. This stream may be consumed by the user in a passive way. The system continues to present information also if no specific user interaction takes place. However, the user may select a particular icon, representing an item of interest, to control the further actions of the system. The result of such selection includes the display of to the particular icon associated sequences of icons in respective fields and the display of the to the particular icon associated information item in the output field. After the selection, the user may play a passive role or may continue to select particular icons as desired. So the information system according to the invention offers a mixture of the two extreme types described above. This is in particular advantageous for an application of the system that is offered to a very large number of user, in which there is a wide variety in the level of skills for operating such an application. Novice users may remain passive but will still receive information while more expert users may actively access the system with specific needs for certain information items. An example of such a system may be an Internet site where a company presents itself. With no or little interaction, the application presents the company on a broad, general level allowing the user to zoom in through some selections. A user requesting specific information, like product information, can use the application to find this information by selecting the appropriate icons displayed by the application.

CLAIMS:

1. An information processing system comprising:
 - a display,
 - processing means, arranged for displaying in a first field on the display a first sequence of first icons in a timed loop and repeatedly making the currently displayed
 - 5 first icon selectable, and
 - selecting means, arranged for selecting the selectable first icon,characterised in that
 - the processing means are arranged for, upon selection of the selectable first icon, displaying in a second field on the display a second sequence of second icons in a timed
 - 10 loop and repeatedly making the currently displayed second icon selectable, and
 - that the selecting means are arranged for selecting the selectable second icon.
2. An information processing system as claimed in Claim 1, wherein the processing means are arranged for, upon selection of the selectable first icon, displaying an information item in an output field on the display.
- 15 3. An information processing system as claimed in Claim 1, wherein the processing means are arranged for, upon selection of the selectable second icon, displaying an information item in an output field on the display.
4. An information processing system as claimed in Claim 2 or 3, wherein the information item comprises a sequence of information sub-items in a timed loop.
- 20 5. A method for enabling a user to select an icon from a set of icons, the set comprising a plurality of first icons, comprising the steps of:
 - displaying the first icons in a timed loop in a first field on a display and repeatedly making the currently displayed first icon selectable, and
 - detecting a selection of the selectable first icon,
- 25 characterised in that the set of icons comprises a plurality of second icons and that the method further comprises the steps of:
 - upon detection of the selection of the selectable first icon, displaying the second icons in a timed loop in a second field on the display and repeatedly making the currently displayed second icon selectable, and

- detecting a selection of the selectable second icon.

6. A method as claimed in Claim 5, comprising the step of, upon selecting the selectable first icon, displaying an information item in an output field on the display.

7. A method as claimed in Claim 5, comprising the step of, upon selecting
5 the selectable second icon, displaying an information item in an output field on the display.

8. A method as claimed in Claim 6 or 7, wherein the information item comprises a plurality of information sub-items displayed in a timed loop.

ABSTRACT:

Information processing system.

In an information processing system (300), a first sequence (202) of icons is displayed one after the other in a field (204) on the display (312). The instantaneous displayed icon (204) is made selectable to the user of the system. Upon selection of a particular icon (204) of the first sequence, a second sequence (208) of icons associated
5 with the selected icon of the first sequence, is displayed one after the other in another field (214) on the display. The sequences of icons, displayed in the different fields, constitute a hierarchical menu structure of two levels, now realised with only two fields on the display.

Figure 2

6/

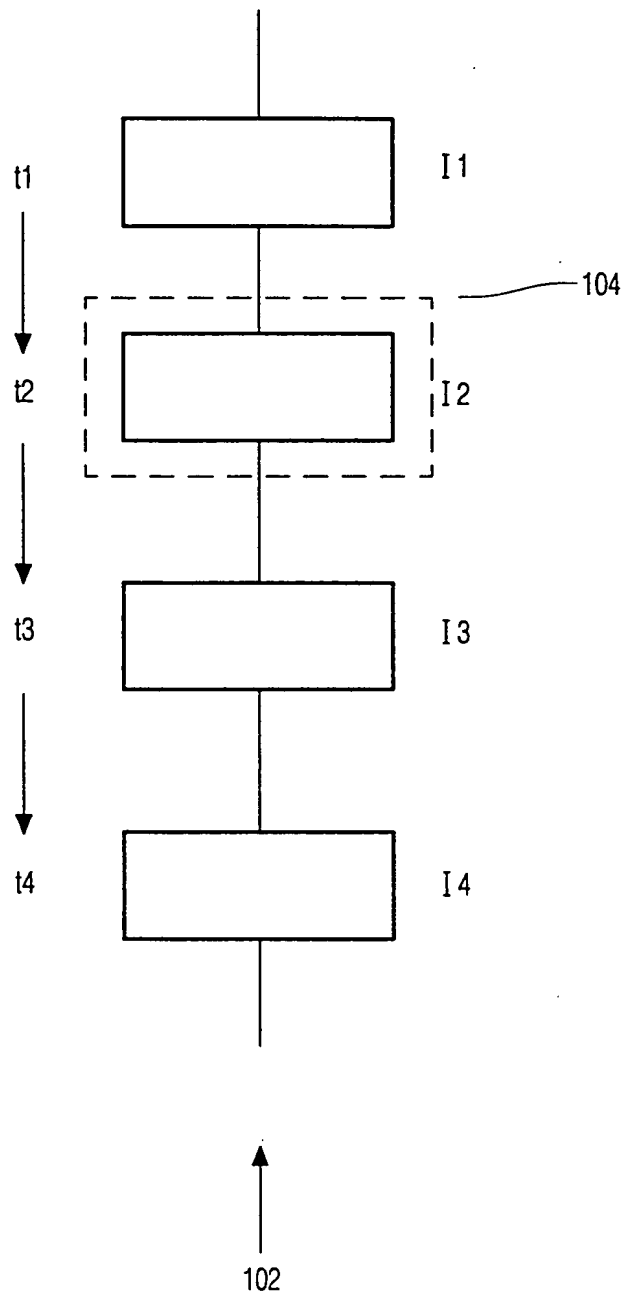


FIG. 1

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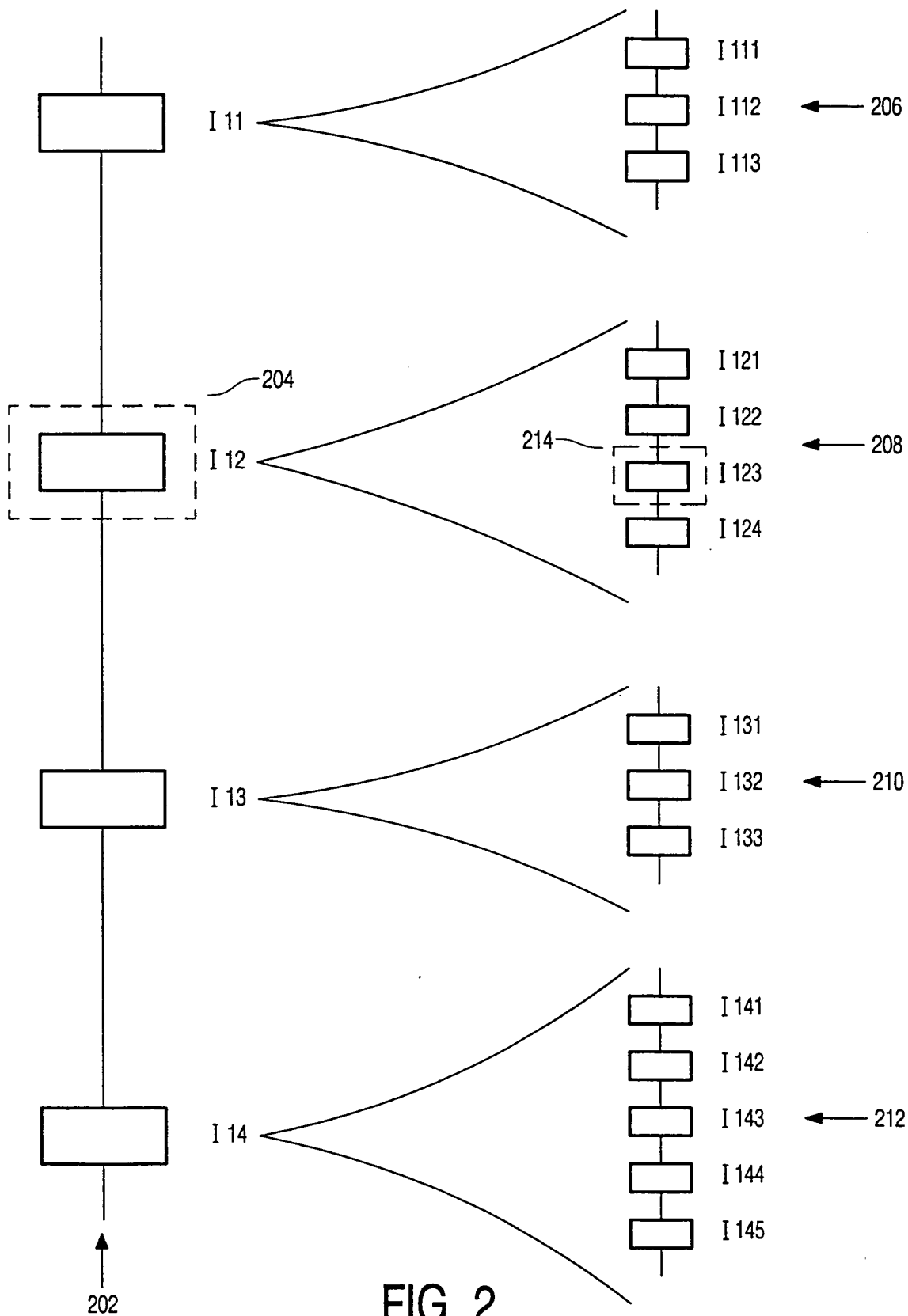


FIG. 2

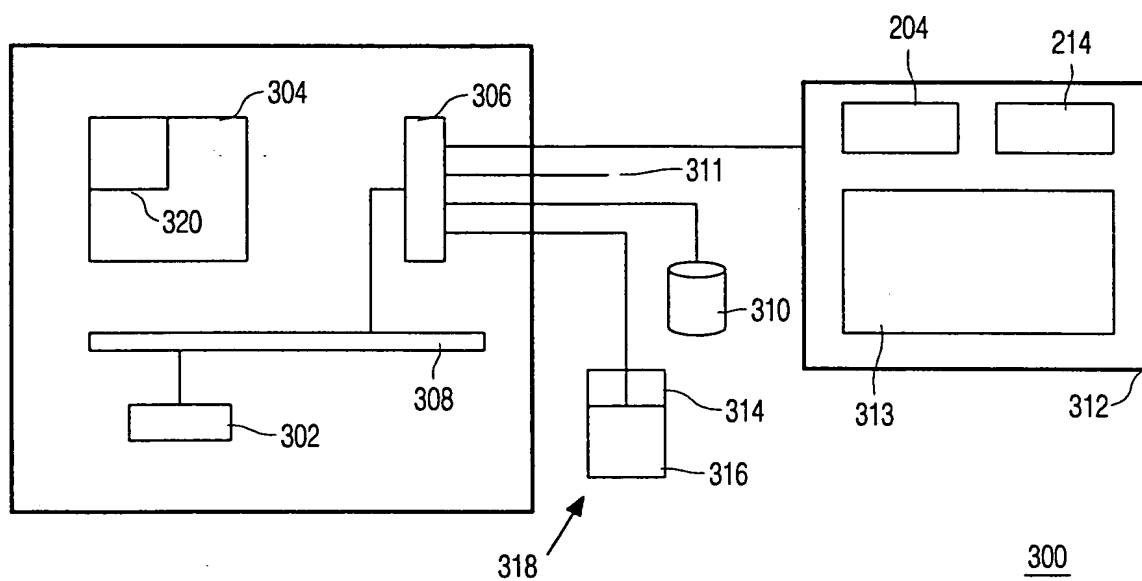


FIG. 3

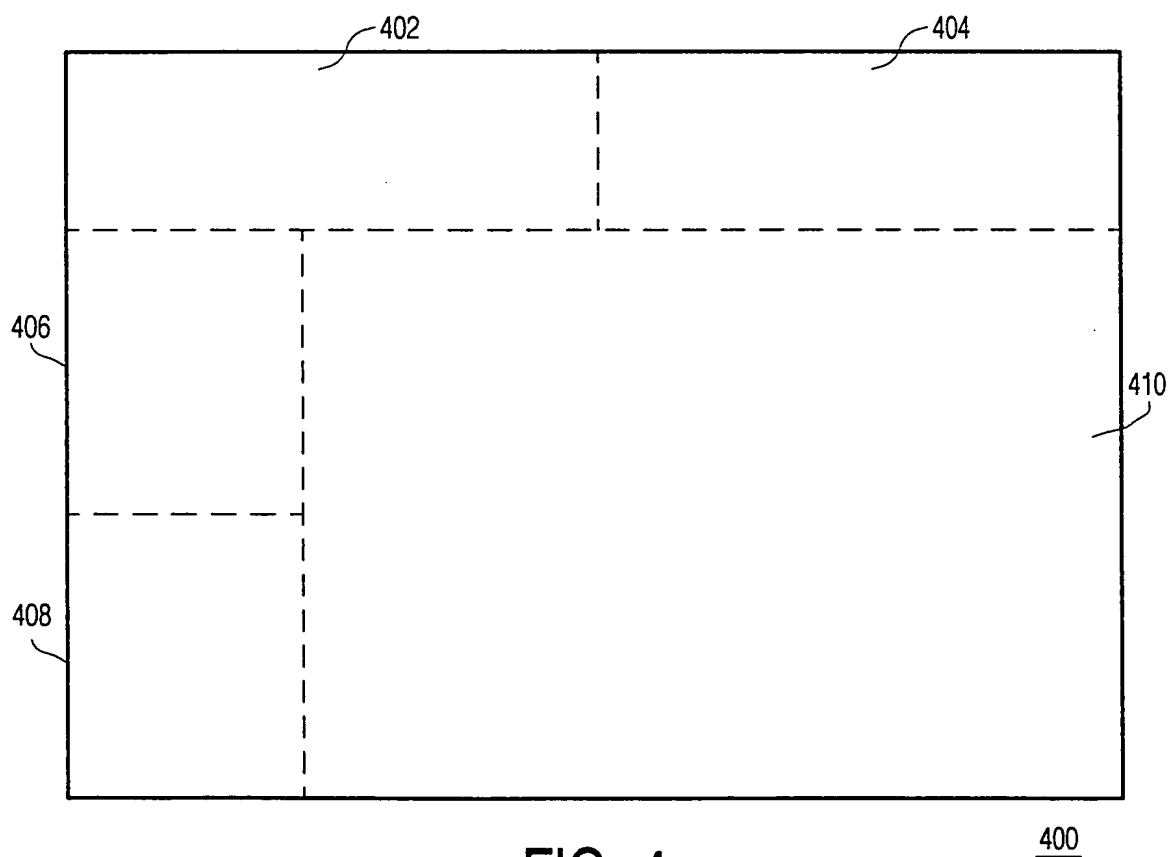


FIG. 4